DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 472 503 HE 035 617

AUTHOR	Cramer, Robert J.
TITLE	Purchases of Degrees from Diploma Mills.
INSTITUTION	General Accounting Office, Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	GAO-03-269R
PUB DATE	2002-11-21
NOTE	10p.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.gao.gov.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Degrees (Academic); *Educational Attainment; *Fraud; Higher Education
IDENTIFIERS	*Diploma Mills; Sales Transactions

ABSTRACT

In response to a request from the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs, the General Accounting Office (GAO) investigated issues concerning the proliferation of "diploma mills," which sell bogus academic degrees based on "life experience" or substandard or negligible work. Acting in an undercover capacity, representatives of the GAO purchased bachelor's and master's degrees from Degrees-R-Us, a diploma mill. The GAO also interviewed persons who had purchased such degrees, but was not able to determine, because of a lack of candor, whether purchasers had benefited financially from the degrees. A review of more than 1,200 resumes that included degrees from 14 of 43 identified diploma mills resulted in the selection of 4 individuals to be interviewed. The GAO has referred the particular diploma mill to the Federal Trade Commission and U.S. Postal Service for additional investigation. (SLD)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 472 503

Purchases of Degrees from Diploma Mills

United States General Accounting Office

November 21, 2002

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

HE 035 617

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

HE HETR
0067

GAO
Accountability • Integrity • Reliability

United States General Accounting Office
Washington, DC 20548

November 21, 2002

The Honorable Susan M. Collins
Ranking Minority Member
Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations
Committee on Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

Subject: Purchases of Degrees from Diploma Mills

Dear Senator Collins:

This report responds to your request that we investigate issues concerning the proliferation of diploma mills, which sell bogus academic degrees based upon "life experience" or substandard or negligible academic work. Specifically, you asked that the Office of Special Investigations, acting in an undercover capacity, demonstrate how easy it is to purchase a degree from a diploma mill. You also asked us to identify and interview individuals who have purchased degrees from diploma mills and determine whether those individuals have used their bogus degrees to increase income, defraud employers, or gain positions of public trust. We briefed your office on our investigative findings. This report summarizes those findings and includes documents referenced in that briefing.

We conducted our investigation from May 14, 2001, through May 8, 2002, in accordance with investigative standards established by the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency. We searched the Internet and identified Degrees-R-Us as a diploma mill. Posing as an individual working in the biology and medical technology field, our investigator purchased a bachelor's and a master's degree, as well as a 1-year "degree verification service" from Degrees-R-Us. In addition, we obtained a list of individuals who have purchased degrees from Degrees-R-Us and interviewed several of them to determine how they have used their degrees. We also obtained a list of entities that the Oregon State Office of Degree Authorization has identified as diploma mills and enlisted the assistance of a government-sponsored Internet job recruitment Web site to identify individuals who have listed degrees from diploma mills on their résumés. We then conducted interviews with several individuals who held positions of trust and responsibility in order to determine whether they used their diploma mill degrees to obtain their positions, increase their earning potential, or defraud employers.

In summary, we purchased a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology and a Master of Science degree in Medical Technology from Degrees-R-Us, a diploma mill. Based on the lack of candid responses during our interviews with individuals who purchased

HE 03.30:7

degrees from Degrees-R-Us, we were not able to determine whether they benefited financially or otherwise from the bogus degrees. However, our review of résumés and subsequent interviews with individuals who purchased degrees from other diploma mills established that these individuals intended to benefit from their bogus degrees and in some cases might have benefited from them. As a result of our investigation, we referred Degrees-R-Us to both the Federal Trade Commission and the U.S. Postal Service for further investigation.

Purchase of Degrees from Degrees-R-Us

After identifying Degrees-R-Us as a diploma mill, we held numerous discussions in an undercover capacity with its owner. Posing as Susan M. Collins, we first contacted Degrees-R-Us to obtain information regarding the steps to follow in purchasing degrees. Following those instructions, we successfully purchased a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology dated June 13, 1975, and a Master of Science degree in Medical Technology dated June 10, 1988, in the name of Susan M. Collins. The degrees were awarded by Lexington University, a nonexistent institution purportedly located in Middletown, New York. Pursuant to Degrees-R-Us's request, we provided the names and telephone numbers of individuals who could provide references and vouch for Ms. Collins' job experience in biology and medical technology. However, Degrees-R-Us did not contact any of our references. We paid $1,515 to Degrees-R-Us for the "premium package" (enc. I). The package included two diplomas from Lexington University (enc. II), honors distinctions, and a telephone degree verification service that could be accessed by potential employers wishing to verify information regarding the school transcripts and degrees purportedly conferred (enc. III).

To test the degree verification service, we posed as a potential employer of Ms. Collins. An individual associated with Degrees-R-Us confirmed that Ms. Collins had been awarded a bachelor's and a master's degree from Lexington University.

Lack of Candor Prevented Determination Regarding How Individuals May Have Benefited from Bogus Degrees

We also obtained a list of individuals who purchased degrees from Degrees-R-Us and attempted to interview them. The individuals we interviewed were not candid in discussing why they purchased the degrees or how they used them.

At the time of our investigation, the Oregon State Office of Degree Authorization identified 43 institutions as diploma mills or unaccredited institutions. To determine the reason for which the degrees had been purchased, we requested that a government-sponsored Internet résumé repository query its database to determine if any résumés it contained listed degrees from entities identified by the state of Oregon as diploma mills. We received a database of more than 1,200 résumés that included degrees from 14 of the 43 diploma mills.

We then reviewed each résumé to determine if the job applicant held a position of trust and responsibility. Based on our review, we concluded that approximately 200 individuals held such positions. Of these, we interviewed four individuals who had purchased degrees from entities listed on the state of Oregon's diploma mill list.

Based on our review of the résumés and interviews with the four individuals, we believe that these individuals intended to use the bogus degrees to benefit financially or defraud employers. In this regard, each résumé listed the degrees, and the individuals disclosed to us that they purchased the degrees either to enhance their résumé or to be considered for certain positions.

Referral of Degrees-R-Us to the Federal Trade Commission and U.S. Postal Service

After purchasing the degrees from Degrees-R-Us and testing its degree verification service, we interviewed the firm's owner. We learned that the owner is a disbarred attorney who resides in Las Vegas, Nevada, and who runs the business out of his home using the Internet and relying on mail drops and toll-free numbers. The owner told us that he has sold approximately 100 degrees since starting his business approximately 2 years ago. He explained that he started the business after viewing a television exposé about the prosecution of a diploma mill operator and deciding that he could more successfully operate a diploma mill. Notwithstanding the company's degree verification service, the owner claimed that he sells the degrees for "self esteem purposes" and not to satisfy employment requirements. The owner admitted that although "candidates" are required to provide references vouching for their experience, he does not verify such experience because he assumes that his customers are honest people.

We referred this matter to both the Federal Trade Commission and the U.S. Postal Service for further investigation.

As agreed with your office, unless you announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 30 days after its date. At that time, we will send copies of this report to interested congressional committees. The report will also be available at no charge on the GAO Web site at http://www.gao.gov. If you have questions about the investigation, please contact Acting Assistant Director Andrew O'Connell at (202) 512-7449 or Senior Special Agent Robyn D. Stewart at (202) 512-7475.

Sincerely yours,

Robert J. Cramer

Robert J. Cramer
Managing Director
Office of Special Investigations

Enclosures

UNIVERSITY SERVICES

Phone: 1-877-272-6353

October 4, 2001

Ms. Susan M. Collins
4201 Wilson Blvd., Apt. #110-317
Arlington, Virginia 22203

Re: LEXINGTON UNIVERSITY

Dear Ms. Collins:

Enclosed please find the following:

1) Bachelor of Science in Biology, dated June 13, 1975 - diploma
2) Transcripts for a Bachelor's Degree in Biology with a GPA of 3.8
3) Master of Science in Medical Technology, dated June 10, 1988.
4) Dean's List Certificates for all 8 semesters on your Bachelor's Degree
5) Envelopes from Lexington University

You also ordered the Premium Program where your records can be viewed at the web site.

To see your record, at the University web site:
1) Go to www.lexingtonuniversity.org
2) Scroll down page until you get to Alumni and click on it
3) At the top of this page click where it says "click here" and when the password box pops up type in your case sensitive password:

Your Password is: smcollins (all small letters)

You also ordered the Premier Program where your records can be verified at the Registrar's Office. The telephone numbers to the Registrar's Office for Lexington University are: 1-800-942-1895 and the New York Exchange Number 845-344-8238.

We appreciate the opportunity to be of service to you. Should you need any further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

Karen

Karen M. Whitley
Customer Service
whitka@greenvalley.net

kw
Enclosures

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Enclosure II

Lexington University

Know all men by these presents:
The Board of Trustees of Lexington University, upon the recommendation of the Resident and Faculty, have conferred upon

Susan M. Collins

the degree of

Master of Science

Medical Technology

with all the rights privileges and honors pertaining thereto.
In testimony thereof we have affixed our signatures and the seal of the University this tenth day of June, in the year of our Lord, one thousand nine hundred and eighty eight.

Miller Fielding
President of the Board of Trustees

Joseph Carter
President of the University

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Enclosure II

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Lexington University

Know all men by these presents:
The Board of Trustees of Lexington University, upon the recommendation of the Resident and Faculty, have conferred upon

Susan M. Collins

the degree of

Bachelor of Science

Biology

with all the rights privileges and honors pertaining thereto.
In testimony thereof we have affixed our signatures and the seal of the University this thirteenth day of June, in the year of our Lord, one thousand nine hundred and seventy five.

Millie Fallsign
President of the Board of Trustees

Joseph Carter
President of the University

Lexington University
Registrar Records Repository
400 Route 211 East
Middletown, NY 10940

SIN: 75 2245*

Susan M Collins
6880 West 91st Court Apt #16102
Westminster, Colorado 80021

OFFICIAL ACADEMIC TRANSCRIPT

Date of Birth: 12/07/52
Social Security Number: 007-02-9185

THIS IS AN OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT IF IT BEARS THE SIGNATURE OF THE REGISTRAR. UNLESS A STATEMENT TO THE CONTRARY IS SHOWN THE STUDENT WHOSE NAME APPEARS HEREON IS IN GOOD ACADEMIC STANDING AND IS ELIGIBLE FOR HE ADMISSION TO LEXINGTON UNIVERSITY

CONFIDENTIAL [illegible] without Permission from Student

Degree: Bachelor of Science
Major: Biology

Date: June 13, 1975

Fall	1971	Grade	QP	Hrs	QPI
ENG	101 Composition I	A	4	3	12
MAT	104 Finite Mathematics	A	4	3	12
BUS	100 Commerce	B	3	3	9
ECO	201 Macroeconomics	A	4	3	12
COS	101 Oral Communication	A	4	3	12
	TOTALS		16	15	57
	GPA	3.80			

Spring	1972	Grade	QP	Hrs	QPI
ENG	102 Composition II	A	4	3	12
MAT	176 Introductory Calculus	A	4	3	12
ACC	101 Elementary Accounting	A	4	3	12
BIO	100 Human Biology / Lab	A	4	4	16
PSY	101 Intro to Psychology	A	3	3	12
	TOTALS		19	16	64
	GPA	3.81			

Fall	1972	Grade	QP	Hrs	QPI
ENG	231 World Literature	B	3	3	9
SOC	201 Intro to Sociology	A	4	3	12
ECO	261 Statistical Methods	A	4	3	12
SPA	113 Spanish I	B	3	3	9
CHE	110 Intro To Chemical Principles I	A	4	3	12
	TOTALS		18	15	64
	GPA	3.60			

Spring	1973	Grade	QP	Hrs	QPI
CHE	111 Intro To Chemical Principles II	A	4	3	12
HIS	101 Western Civilization	B	3	3	9
BIO	191 Principles of Modern Bio	A	4	4	16
BIO	223 Human Anatomy and Phys I	A	4	4	16
SPA	114 Spanish II	B	3	3	9
	TOTALS		18	17	62
	GPA	3.65			

Fall	1973	Grade	QP	Hrs	QPI
BIO	224 Human Anatomy and Phys II	A	4	4	16
BIO	191 Principles of Modern Bio II	A	4	4	16
BIO	205 Human Genetics	A	4	3	12
GEY	135 Natural Resources	A	4	3	12
THE	201 Theatre	A	4	3	12
	TOTALS		20	17	68
	GPA	4.00			

Spring	1974	Grade	QP	Hrs	QPI
BIO	257 General Microbiology	A	4	4	16
HIS	301 Ancient History	B	3	3	9
CHE	325 Organic Chemistry	A	4	4	16
BIO	300 General Genetics	A	4	4	16
BIO	309 Introduction to Cell Biology	A	4	4	16
	TOTALS		19	19	73
	GPA	3.84			

Fall	1974	Grade	QP	Hrs	QPI
BIO	265 Cell Physiology	A	4	4	16
SOC	445 Complex Organizations	A	4	3	12
BLW	302 Legal Environment	B	3	3	9
BIO	459 Intro to Biophysics	A	4	3	12
MUS	102 Music Appreciation	B	3	3	9
	TOTALS		18	16	58
	GPA	3.63			

Spring	1975	Grade	QP	Hrs	QPI
BIO	442 Principles of Plant Physiology	A	4	3	12
BIO	444 Principles of Plant Ecology	A	4	3	12
BIO	453 Immunology	A	4	4	16
BIO	467 Principles of Systematics	A	4	4	16
PSY	462 Human Interaction	A	4	3	12
	TOTALS		20	17	68
	GPA	4.00			

		QP	Hrs	QPI
	TOTALS	151	132	501
	Overall GPA	3.80		

PAGE 1 OF 1

Maria Flores
Maria Flores
Registrar

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Enclosure III

Lexington University

Office of the Registrar

Lexington University
Registrar Records Repository
400 Route 211 East
Middletown, NY 10940

Transcript Guide

ACCREDITATION

Lexington University is a privately owned institution for higher education. It is an approved and fully accredited member of the Southern States Association of Colleges and Schools, the Council for the Accreditation of Higher Education, the American Economics Association, the National Chemical Society, The Western States Psychological Association, the Council on Industrial Management, and the National Standards Committee on Higher Education.

CREDIT AND HOURS

Academic credits are awarded on the semester-hour basis. One semester hour is equal to one credit.

GRADING SYSTEM

The following grades are used in reporting the student's scholastic achievement:

A	Excellent	4.00
B	Good	3.00
C	Average	2.00
D	Passing	1.00 (undergraduate only)
F	Failing	0.00
P	Pass	0.00 (with credits earned)
S	Satisfactory	0.00 (with credits earned)
U	Unsatisfactory	0.00 (no credits earned)

Other Designations (carrying no quality points):

I	Incomplete
Q	Total University Withdrawal (or quit)
L	Work in progress
R	Research in progress
W	Withdrawal (individual course)
*	Credits not reported by instructor

COURSE NUMBERING SYSTEM

000-099 Institutional credit*
100-299 Lower level undergraduate
300-499 Upper level undergraduate
500-999 Graduate

*Note: Institutional credit counts toward enrollment status but does not count towards graduation or in the computation of the quality point average.

ACADEMIC STANDING

Scholastic status is indicated by one of the following:

Good Standing - Satisfactory scholastic status

Probation - Below acceptable academic standards of the university, but eligible to continue in attendance.

Extended Probation - Approved extension of probation status

Dismissal - Dismissed for unsatisfactory academic achievement.

TRANSFER CREDIT

Lexington University awards credits for courses completed at other accredited institutions of higher education. Generally, credits are accepted for courses bearing grades of C or higher for undergraduate students, or B higher for graduate students. Grades and quality points do not transfer, except as part of course work approved under the State System of Higher Education Visiting Student Policy.

OTHER TRANSCRIPT-NOTATIONS

Fresh Start

Undergraduate baccalaureate students separated from the university for five consecutive calendar years may apply for Fresh Start. The policy provides for the cumulative grade point average to start anew at the time of readmission. Upon review by the dean, credits only from certain "C" or better courses may be applied as transfer credits to the Fresh Start record.

Repeated Course

An undergraduate student may repeat a course with a D of an F grade. Six (6) repeat attempts are permitted in which the repeated grade replaces the original course grade. Subsequent repeats will be averaged into the student's cumulative quality point average. Graduate students may repeat one course for a maximum of three (3) attempts bearing a grade of D or F for each graduate degree program.

Audited Course

A course taken on an audit basis will not be graded and will not count toward the fulfillment of degree requirements. Since credit hours attempted and quality points will not be awarded for an audited course, it will not affect the student's quality point average.

(601089)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

NOTICE

Reproduction Basis

	This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket)" form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.
X	This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").